

REFORMING THE SEND SYSTEM

EXPERIENCES FROM THURROCK



**October
2025**

*A report on the
system of special
educational
needs and
disabilities in the
Thurrock
constituency.*

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Introduction

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Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) support in Thurrock has been stretched to crisis point.

Like many local authorities, Thurrock has seen a rapid increase in demand, leaving schools, council services, and local healthcare providers struggling to keep pace.

At present, more than one in ten pupils in mainstream schools in Thurrock (12%) now receive SEN support, equating to over 7,300 children and young people. 2,500 pupils also have an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP), reflecting an increase of 63 per cent since 2019.

Separately, there are three special schools in the Thurrock constituency, supporting around 550 students with additional needs.

This intense pressure on education settings and local authorities is having a devastating impact on families, with poorer educational outcomes for children with SEND.



In Thurrock, only one in four children receiving SEN support (27%) will meet the expected standard in reading, writing, or maths.

By amplifying the voices of local families, alongside the experiences of education professionals, this report seeks to go beyond the data: to examine the challenges in SEND provision, understand the impact on children and parents, and explore recommendations for change.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jen". The signature is stylized with a long horizontal line extending from the bottom of the letter "n".

Methodology

This research considers the perspectives of pupils, parents, and education professionals in its analysis of the SEND system in Thurrock.

The data analysed in the following sections was collected predominately through three surveys of different groups:

Children & Young People

16 responses. Pupils with SEND, from an age range of 6-25 years old, were asked about their experience of education. Participants were spread evenly between educational providers.

Parents & Carers

115 responses. The majority of respondents either had a child in primary school (55%) or secondary school (33%), with some respondents with a child in nursery (4%) or post-16 education (8%).

Education Professionals

26 responses. The respondents were predominantly teachers and school support staff working with SEND students in Thurrock (80% based in mainstream schools, 20% in special schools).

In-Person Sessions

Survey data was supported by qualitative evidence from two events in Thurrock, where local parents and education professionals discussed key issues with SEND provision. In total, 38 parents and 23 professionals attended the sessions.



Overview of Responses

Children & Young People

Overall, children and young people's experiences of their education were positive. When asked to rate their education setting out of five – with five representing strong enjoyment of their learning – the average response was just over three.

A majority of children felt included at school, with three quarters of respondents (77%) saying they felt able to take part in activities at their education setting. Several responses specifically highlighted the positives of mainstream inclusion:

“

Thurrock's schools and colleges are open minded about SEND.

A school suited for SEND needs will benefit all of the kids.

”

The significant role of school staff in pupils' experiences was clear: 61 per cent of respondents said they felt listened to by their teachers, with responses highlighting how much they valued “a safe adult to talk to” or one-to-one support.

However, lack of support was also a common theme. Over half of respondents (54%) said they did not get enough help at school or college.

When asked about the negatives of their learning environment, children and young people described the environment as overwhelming, mentioning “noise” and “shouting” – with one saying, “it can feel too intense”.



61% of children and young people said they felt listened to by their teachers

Overview of Responses

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Parents & Carers

Responses from parents focused more acutely on the challenges within the SEND system in Thurrock, and the consequent impact on their child's learning and wellbeing.

Parents identified a range of difficulties that children and young people were experiencing at their education setting. Anxiety and emotionally based difficulties were the most common, each mentioned in 43 per cent of responses, alongside reports of a lack of support, mentioned in 36 per cent of responses. In 6 per cent of cases, shortcomings in meeting sensory needs at school were said to be impacting their young person's experience of education.

Because of these issues, more than half of parents and carers (53%) said their young person was finding it difficult to attend their education setting, with 45 per cent of respondents reporting an absence from education due to needs not being met. One parent said that "every day is a battle to get [their daughter] into education".

53% said their young person was finding it difficult to attend education

21 young people had been away from school for longer than four weeks

Where children had been absent from school or college, nearly half (47%) said this absence was at the request of the educational setting – with responses suggesting this was often on account of disciplinary issues:

“In his mind, he will go in, get no help, get in trouble and go home.

I do believe all she needed was understanding and support not discipline and punishment.

”

Overview of Responses

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21 respondents said their child or young person had been away from school for longer four weeks; 10 of whom had been absent for over a year.

A common theme in responses was the onus being on parents to hold services to account, in order to ensure their child received the support they were entitled to:

“ *You have to complain to Thurrock council to get things done.*
Everything I have done has been off of my own back. ”

Education Professionals

The responses of education professionals working with SEND students in Thurrock highlighted a clear a commitment and intent to meet children’s needs, but a feeling of being unequipped to do so.

Limited funding or resources were common concerns. One response specifically mentioned “a lack of space to provide great provision”, while another highlighted a “shortage of support staff to accommodate reasonable adjustments”.

Particularly, responses called for “more specialist knowledge in mainstream as there are no places elsewhere”. There are three special schools in the Thurrock constituency, but during the in-person sessions both parents and education professionals said places were very difficult to find.

Responses from education professionals also demonstrated how wider problems in the system were impacting their ability to meet children’s needs.

“Quicker processing” and “better diagnosis” were mentioned in several responses, while the role of healthcare services was also a common theme.



Priorities for Change

Educational Health and Care Plans (EHCPs)

EHCPs were the most frequently raised issue across survey data. When asked what needed to change to improve SEND provision in the borough, 11 per cent of parents pointed to issues with their child's EHCP.

Predominantly, concerns related to issues securing an EHCP and the time taken to implement changes from annual reviews. 59 of the parents and carers surveyed had children with an EHCP. Of this group, 31 waited between 21-52 weeks to secure their plan, 15 waited more than a year, and eight more than two years.

53 per cent of children had their EHCP amended at annual review, but changes took significant time to implement; 15 families waited 21-51 weeks and nine longer than a year. Several parents noted that, in the months it had taken for their child's EHCP to come back after review, the document expired.

“The EHCP for my child took 62 weeks to complete. The Educational Psychiatrist observed my daughter for five minutes, within three months the school called emergency review. The document has now sat with the Local Authority since March. Reviews have been on hold.”

Parents also worried EHCPs were too vague, failing to properly address children's needs:

“The EHCP process is often slow, stressful, and difficult to navigate. A more responsive, transparent, and family-centred approach is urgently needed.”

EHCP are so vague if you don't know how to fight it, it is open to abuse.

EHCP process is a total nightmare. Battle to get them to read anything we submitted.”

The responses from education professionals reinforced the dysfunctionality of the EHCP framework. Several suggested that reducing the reliance on Educational Psychologists would speed up the delivery of support:

“The current system's over-reliance on Educational Psychologists creates significant backlogs. Whilst national consistency in assessment is crucial, this responsibility shouldn't rest solely with EPs.”

Priorities for Change

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Fractured and Adversarial System

When asked to write about their key concerns with the SEND system, nearly a quarter of parents and carers (24%) described issues with communication and cohesion.

Parents felt local support was disjointed, and struggled to maintain simultaneous relationships with teachers, healthcare services and the Council SEND team.

“ We are connected in to all the services we can, but it is not joined up, so nothing is helping.

Holistic approaches, all services need to work together. You cannot solve a portion of an issue and expect results. ”

Overwhelmingly, parents found support and information was not readily available, something reflected in education professionals’ concerns. Many parents described needing to fight for help.

“ You feel no one believes your children and their struggles and all you can do is be on constant fight or flight mode. [Parent]

As a parent we shouldn’t have to feel like it’s a battle with SEND to get our children’s needs met. [Parent]

Thurrock do not have clear and embedded ordinarily available provision’ [Education Professional] ”

There was clear demand for greater effort to keep parents informed, with the suggestion that a singular point of contact, able to facilitate cooperation between different local services, would make a significant difference. At the in-person sessions, attendees explained that repeating the same information to various professionals within the system becomes a real drain on their time.

Overwhelmingly, education professionals called for stronger partnerships between providers, explaining that failure in one area of the system can undermine success in another.

“ Children may mask their needs in school whilst experiencing significant difficulties at home, potentially leading to school avoidance. Enhanced home support for assessed families could alleviate pressures schools face from parents. This clearly identifies the needs for partnership working, rather than one service blaming the other. [Education Professional] ”

Council professionals emphasise that they will continue to work with parents, carers, young people and professionals to create a more cohesive and effective system that meets the needs of every child or young person in Thurrock.

Priorities for Change

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Specialist Support and Teacher Training

Specialist support was a central focus for parents and carers. When asked what they wanted to see change, one in five (21%) said their child needed additional, tailored help in school. Where specialist training was lacking, parents saw this as resulting in unnecessary disciplinary action.

“ **We need proper training for teachers and staff instead of being labelled incorrectly and disciplined heavily expecting change.** [Parent]

Schools are becoming more rigid and inflexible/ more behaviourist and resorting to punishments and sanctions and exclusions. [Education Professional]

Both parents and school staff themselves identified the need for greater training at all levels, in order to build specialist knowledge in mainstream settings.

“ **Make sure SEND is included in teacher training courses, not just as a two-hour lecture as an afterthought.** [Parent]

The NPQH should incorporate greater SEND emphasis, ensuring headteachers develop comprehensive understanding of SEND policies' [Education Professional]

Local authorities should provide statutory training programmes for new heads and SENCOs. [Education Professional]

Specifically, parents and professionals noted a lack of specialist support in early years settings, with a concern this absence of intervention was leading to an escalation in the needs of children.

“ **Early intervention is key.** [Education Professional]

What created problems was waiting lists for diagnosis and appointments and nursery placements where staff lacked knowledge in neurodiversity. [Parent]

Without early intervention families are left to struggle on a daily basis. [Parent]

Council professionals recognised this challenge and highlighted that the Thurrock Local Area Partnership has been working hard to intensify focus on enhancing specialist training for education professionals, particularly in early years settings, to promote early intervention and build SEND expertise in mainstream schools. Over the past year, they have invested over £500k in training opportunities, supporting hundreds of educators.

Priorities for Change

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Funding Constraints

12% of parents and carers mentioned funding as a key concern. Many described paying for private tuition, or buying additional educational resources for their child.

“SEN children need targeted support in school, specific interventions, funding for equipment such as laptops or Chromebooks and other reasonable adjustments. It is so inconsistent between schools.”

Educational professionals shared concerns around funding constraints. When asked what needs to change, over 80% referenced underfunding. Several professionals asked that money for SEND be ringfenced, so schools cannot cut back in this area.

“The SEN notional budget within schools' delegated budgets must be ring-fenced, ensuring funds are spent exclusively on SEND provision and justified with the same rigour as pupil premium funding.”

Narrow View of Need

Parents and carers felt as if support for their child was based upon legal obligations, instead of a holistic view of health and wellbeing. Specifically, parents wanted to see more of a focus on setting children up for life:

“It's brainwashing to think that their only option is GCSE's at school when qualifications can be achieved anywhere and at any time in your life.”

Everything is looked at like a system, like a machine.. all the compassion is gone.”

Education professionals also wanted greater freedom in the approach to teaching.

“Schools should have less pressure from the government in terms of narrow curriculum and a one size fits all to enable them to meet SEN needs better.”

Schools need to adopt a variety of teaching approaches.... respecting different ways that children and young people learn.”

More broadly, parents and education professionals wanted to see more support in place for children's general wellbeing. 11% of parents highlighted a lack of activities for children with SEND.

“There are not enough SEN play sessions for older kids. [Parent]”

There was a cut of funding on things that helped my son's learning, such as nurture club [Parent]”

Despite the overwhelming focus on creating change in SEND provision, there were a number of shared views among parents and education professionals about positives in the current system.

When asked about what worked well for their family, the most common response from parents was the support of school and specialist staff. This was mentioned by 34 per cent of respondents, with the importance of one-to-one support again highlighted:

“

My son enjoys his time there because of the staff.

We have fantastic one-to-one support at mainstream.

”

34% of parents
praised the
support of staff

Responses also acknowledged the effort to meet children's needs in settings not designed for SEND, or with limited support:

“

The mainstream school do their best to meet needs in a facility not designed for my son.

Teachers are doing the best they can to support my son in school, although they are really restricted due to limited funding available.

”

Alongside this, the important and valued role of third sector organisations was a recurrent theme.

There was significant praise for advice services and community organisations from both parents and professionals.

One education professional labelled charity support groups as “priceless”.



Conclusion

The national crisis in SEND provision is well-documented, with widespread commentary on how the system is broken.

This report has focused on the experiences of those affected at a local level in Thurrock: the children and young people whose life chances are being put in jeopardy; the parents and carers whose daily reality is fighting for support for their young person; and the education professionals who are working under mounting pressure to meet the additional needs of pupils.



By looking at the human impacts, and the common themes across responses, potential solutions to the challenges faced in Thurrock are brought into sharper focus.

Funding was a commonly raised issue, reflecting the severe pressure on local authorities across the country. There is a significant amount of money going towards SEND provision locally, with Thurrock Council expecting to spend £40.8 million on high needs support in 2025-2026. However - as is outlined in the recent National Audit Office report - structural failures in the national system mean funds are not being spent efficiently.

The Government should look closely at its plans for SEND funding, particularly the discrepancies between local authorities, the potential to ringfence budgets, and investment in early years to prevent children's needs escalating.

This research also demonstrated a clear consensus about the need for more specialist training in education settings, including in early years to promote early intervention. While some providers do supply training to staff, mandated SEND training would build more specialism into mainstream settings.

Similarly, changes to the SEND system must look beyond the frame of educational attainment alone. As parents voiced clearly, and staff also recognised, the narrow focus of the curriculum can hold children with additional needs back. The focus should rightly be on setting them up for life and promoting overall wellbeing, with the provision of specialist activities and play a good first step to achieving this.

As is the case across the country, responses also spoke to a fragmentation of services in Thurrock – with the onus on families to coordinate between the different support available for their child. While many praised the invaluable support of advice services and community organisations, parents and carers called for a single point of contact with the system to oversee the communication and cooperation between SEND services.

The Government commitment to place specialists in Best Start Family Hubs is a positive step, which the council believes will compliment the SEND provision it already provides at these sites. However, this step must be accompanied by a concerted effort to engage all parents with these services. Similarly, parents were keen to make the point that the crucial role of healthcare services was often overlooked in their child's EHCP. The responsibility too frequently falls upon parents to coordinate healthcare support, and there must be a drive to ensure these are linked up to the support network for SEND children.

Above all, this research showed the widespread commitment to fixing the system: with passion for change among parents and thoughtful solutions suggested by professionals. **When parents are the experts in their child's needs, and school staff see the pressures in the system first hand, the Government must put their voices at the heart of upcoming reforms to SEND provision – to build a system that truly meets the needs of every child.**